



The Church Has Left the Building:
A Conversation with Deb Swift
December 28, 2023



Transcript

Sara Hayden: Deb, thank you so much for being here today, and welcome to the conversation.

Deb Swift: Aw, thanks. I'm really excited to be here. Thanks for asking.

Sara: Yeah. Yeah.

I think that even though we are recording this during the Advent season prior to Christmas, and we'll release it around that time and not necessarily focus on a, quote, "Christmas episode." I feel like there's this sense of newness and anticipation that comes from the work that you have helped usher in, in your ministry, and I'd love to start a little bit thinking about how you have been pastor and faith leader in your community actually for some time-

Deb: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... but the ministry itself that you are a part of has shifted significantly in recent years.

Deb: Boy, howdy.

Sara: Yeah. (laughing) Boy howdy. Yeah. If you could tell us about the time before. Like, the waiting time, where you were leading up to this change and what events or reflections actually ushered those changes in.

Deb: So, I was called to South Presbyterian Church in Rochester, where I'm currently serving, in 2008, and it was a part-time stated supply call and they did not have an interim. They had had nobody, really, for a year before that and had become very congregationally based-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... in their thinking, and prior to that they had wonderful preachers for the last 25 years but everybody there had been stated supply too so they're... they were used to being kind of a church in transition, before I got there-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... and so when I arrived. (laughs) O- one of the first things that the treasurer said to me was, "You know we're gonna run out of money in seven years." And I thought that was hyperbolic.

Sara: (laughs)

Deb: Turns out it wasn't, and I said, "Okay, good to know. Thanks." And we started looking at what it means to be Presbyterian, so at that point, right off the bat we spent a year kinda doing Presbyterian 101, and it was really fun for me to watch because people, like, elders serving on session, showed up at the new members class and I said, "What are you doing here?"

Sara: Mm.

Deb: They said, "Well, we figured we should find out what it is we're supposed to be believing."

And I went, "Great idea."

And then to have a bunch of them say to me, "Wow, this is so cool. I had no idea this is what we believe, 'cause if it wasn't this, I'd have to go find it."

Sara: Mm.

Deb: And I'm like, "Well here you are. Let's dig in."

So that was a full year of kind of reclaiming, 'cause I said, "Look, if you're not Presbyterian, that's fine, but let's be authentic and have integrity and be who we say we are."

Sara: I love that you started, and it's not necessarily, like, where I would think of as the most flashy or exciting place-

Deb: Yeah! Yeah, yeah.

Sara: ... to start. Like-

Deb: Yeah!

Sara: ... "What could I do that would bring people in? Let's talk about Presbyterianism."

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: So what made you start there?

Deb: I didn't have the sense that people knew who they were.

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I figure that until we know who we are, we can't really know who God is calling us to be-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... and I wasn't convinced, at that point, that we were running out of money so I figured, "Ah, I got all the time in the world. Let's really dive into this." And at the end of the first year, then we spent another year really focusing on Scripture, and around the same time, the other urban churches in Rochester had formed an association called Urban Presbyterians Together, and we started bringing in urban pastors from around the country to talk with us, and one of 'em was from Chicago and she came in and she said, you know, "Do something. Let the outside world know that you're still living."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: "Get some paint, it doesn't cost a lot, and buy some banners." And that really struck a cord with our folks and so we started talking about what is church? And we decided that each one of us has so many circles in which we move in life.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: Family, friends, work, community, whatever, and if we could find a way to align our circles together, then we could maybe spread the word of Jesus.

And by aligning our circles together, you might notice that that spells... The initials are A-C-T, and so they became Aligning our Circles Together in Faith-

Sara: Hm.

Deb: ... and that was the beginning of what this congregation developed as a new model for ministry, the Acts of Faith model, and probably around by 2010, 2011, I started to believe that we might run out of money and so by that time we already were having our ministries outside of the building, some of them.

We started a Bagels and the Bible Saturday Bible study at Bruegger's Bagels, and then across the street is Mt Hope Diner and they let us come over there every Friday afternoon. We'd sit for a community book group.

Sara: Hm.

Deb: So, it started with some people from the congregation but by being outside the building, 'cause we all know some people will never come into a church building, so by getting outside the building, people could see us laughing and having fun talking about God and about Scripture and studying and kinda being excited by that, and one thing led to another.

We were having one of those annual required deacon and session meetings and I'm looking at them and I remember I'm sitting on the floor with newsprint and they're all like, seated around me, and I said, "All right, so, what do we wanna do this next year?" And one of the guys who was on buildings and grounds, and he was an elder, he spoke up. He said, "Well, I think we need to sell the building." And we're like, gulp, "What?"

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: And, uh, he said, "No, no, I, I think that's what needs to happen." And so I said, "All right, time out. Let's just go around the circle here and how do y'all feel about this?" And, you know, s- a couple people were hesitant and personally grieving at the thought of leaving this church building, but the others were saying, "I think this might be where God is calling us, because look at how this is working to have these ministries outside the building. People are attracted to it, we're excited by it." And one thing led to another.

We developed this whole model of ministry that's really based on the first century church, I think, and it's go where the people are. Don't expect them to come to you.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And we had an elder who was serving at the time and she stood before church, the whole congregation, one Sunday morning and she says, "I love you all, I love this church, I love Deb's preaching, I love this worship, but I'm not gonna be here for the next year." And I'm looking at her, and I said, "What?" And she said, "No, no, I'm gonna go. Instead, I'll participate in Monday Bible study and Tuesday prayer group, and I'm still gonna sing in the choir rehearsal on Wednesday and I'll do Bagels and the Bible on Saturday."

And I said, "So you're not gonna be here for one hour. Instead you're gonna do four hours?" And she says, "Yeah."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I'm like, "Why?" And she said, "It feels more right to me."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And she said, "I just don't believe that Jesus Christ would stand out here on Mt Hope Avenue..." Which is part of the University of Rochester, College Town.

Sara: Okay.

Deb: "Would stand right out here and would say, 'I got everything you're ever gonna need for life. It's gonna rock your boat. It's gonna rock your soul. And you know what? I'm only gonna tell it to you at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, in that building there.'"

Sara: (laughs) When you put it that way, Deb.

Deb: You know? And we're all looking at her, going, "This is really crazy whacked." But we all decided, I think right around that time, that if the Holy Spirit is present, there's gonna be energy and excitement.

Sara: Wow.

Deb: And if there's not energy and excitement, then maybe that's not where the Spirit's leading us.

Sara: Mm.

Deb: And it became a very simple criterion for measuring the success of our ministries, and at the same time, we all started praying what we've learned to call the dangerous prayer, and that is, "Put us where you want us, and show us what to do."

Sara: Wow.

Deb: And when you really believe that and you really pray it, it's dangerous because God really does it-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... and then it's like put up or shut up time and you gotta get off your butt and go out and do whatever it is you're being led to do.

Sara: Wow.

I'm watching you smile and laugh, and I'm laughing and just absorbing the recklessness of what you are describing. (laughing) And I wanna know, what's-

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: ... going on internally? If you remember during that first conversation, the session deacon meeting where the elder in charge of buildings and ground says, "I wanna sell the building."

Deb: Yeah. (laughs)

Sara: And then I'm also imagining, as maybe other folks who've been a part of congregations are imagining, that this idea gets leaked indiscriminately from that room to others-

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: ... in the congregation. It's like, "Well, Pastor Deb is gonna sell the building." Or... You know. What's happening internally in that moment, to you?

Deb: So, I'm just gonna be shameless for a moment and plug a book.

Sara: Okay.

Deb: It took about five years for us. We sold... ended up selling the building and becoming totally, hundred percent missional church in 2014.

Sara: Okay.

Deb: So this was like four or five years that we were moving in that direction, and there was nothing for me. Man, I got nothing. (laughs)

I kept going and looking for books and trying to talk to people and what is it like to shepherd people through this kind of a thing?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: No we're not closing. No we're not merging.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: No we aren't buying something new. This is like a totally new deal. And thank God I had been a community organizer for almost 20 years because I had a lot of contacts in the city.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: So one thing we decided to do was to engage the architects association, and they do these things called charrettes, across the country, and a charrette is where you bring in all the people related to an area or a project. It's part of a community development model, so we hosted a building charrette, brought in neighbors, and people from Louisville came and th- from the foundation and from the Presbytery and regional transit a-

I mean, just everybody, City Hall, they all came. There were like, 85, 80... 90 people at this-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... charrette.

It's an all day thing where you're drawing up, you're envisioning together, but it's a really cool thing that comes through the realm of architecture-

Sara: Okay.

Deb: ... and the architects are able to get continuing education for their participation in a charrette, and so you end up having design people there and all these folks that...

We split up into I think 10 different tables, and each table would... If they said, "Oh, well maybe we should sell this or turn part of the church building into..." I don't know, "A gym with, you know, a Starbucks in it, and..."

So, people were there who would draw it for you so you could see what it is that you were talking about. And the thing about that was that, number one, it let everybody in on the process.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: Number two, it involved a larger community, so they were well aware of what we were trying to do and we could get help from them later on as we were discerning our call. And number three, you can see it. It's right there in front of you, and that generated more excitement. But I was trying to find what could I read?

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: Where could I go?

It was around that time that I first met Ray Jones at the national church in Evangelism-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... and Ray was just a great partner for us as we were-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... mapping all this out, but we ended up, um, publishing a book. It's *The Church Has Left the Building*.

Sara: Oh, I love that.

Deb: And what it is is it's a case study of one church's story of transformation, redefinition and new life. Uh, it covers about a seven year period, and each chapter begins with chronologically what happened that year, what did we do.

The second part of the chapter is the pastor's thoughts and theological reflection on what we were doing and what I was going through, because I didn't want other people to have to reinvent the wheel and to wonder. And then the third part is the workbook part.

Any church can use this to help them navigate through discerning their call and figuring out how to be leaders.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: So, our people had to learn new ways of being leaders, and I think a big part of the acts of faith, what we call the AOF, acts of faith model, is that a lot of time is spent on leadership development.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: Because one of the principals of the AOF model is that nothing should be pastor dependent.

Sara: Okay.

Deb: And I know that's really scary for a lot of my minister colleagues. It's like, "Well, what do you need me for then?"

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And the answer to that is, we are greatly needed to be training the trainers and to be providing the theological foundation, and to be the shepherds of this group that will learn to rely on itself more than a building, for instance.

Sara: Yeah.

Did you come into the process with that kind of clarity about what your role would be in the process?

Deb: No.

Sara: Okay. (laughs) Well that's comforting, probably.

Deb: I mean, that is just no.

Sara: (laughs) So you didn't know. You're like th- "First I get there, the treasurer says there's seven years left." And you're like, "We're gonna figure out who we are and whose we are and what we're called to do in this moment." But it's gradually leading up to this.

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: We see the energy and theologically we're reflecting and realizing like, no it's ludicrous to think that Jesus wants us all to be waiting in this one place at this one time and that's where the action's gonna happen. We're leading more outward.

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: But I think even with that kinda clarity, I would imagine myself in your position thinking, "Well, what if they really like the Starbucks?"

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: I'm placing myself in your shoes as pastor. I'm also admiring you from afar, like, just the willingness to pray what you call the dangerous prayer. (laughs) Like, "Put us in the places we need to be."

Deb: Put us where you want us and show us what-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... to do.

Sara: But I'm also thinking, "Wow." Like, to trust that process of both we're inviting God's activity and direction, and then we're also-

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: ... inviting a lot of other people-

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: ... who may not be praying that prayer, into exposure and participation in this process that-

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: ... the church is going through.

Deb: One of the things that I really want to emphasize is that this was not the Deb show.

Sara: Okay. Yeah.

Deb: This was a series of session members, as the session rolled over, over the years. This was, uh, the Spirit at work in this "wee kirk", what we call our merry little band of believers.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: At the time I think the average age was probably 74, 75, 'cause now it's, like, 84 and 85.

We have some people in that church, a couple, for instance, who, he is now 91 and began going there with his grandmother when he was six-

Sara: Wow.

Deb: ... and his wife is about 85-ish and sh- started going there when she was 12.

Sara: Amazing.

Deb: They are two of four people who still go to church there and are members and were part of the Westminster youth fellowship together when they were teenagers and in their-

Sara: Hm.

Deb: ... 20s. So, there are some people who have l- longevity, and every church has these folks but-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... when you're trying to do this kind of transition, it was very interesting because people would come up to me and say, "Well, you know, those two are not gonna agree with you."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: "They are g- so gonna be against this."

And I knew that wasn't true because all of us who are pastors know that we need to befriend those people who are the stakeholders, who carry the history inside them, and-

Sara: Hm.

Deb: ... who...

E- they have ultimately become adoptive grandparents to my children.

Sara: Wow.

Deb: That's how close we have become.

I went and sat down with them and I said, "Look, you know, you're not..."

E- they were both deacons. They're lifelong deacons and both had been on session, but I just said, "I just need to talk to you off the record and tell you what's going on, and this is what we're thinking of doing and this is why we're thinking of doing it, and I need to know how you feel about it."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And they were thrilled and excited because they said this could be the future for our church.

Now if you talk with them like 15 years later, they will both, and so will everyone who was a part of this journey, will look at you and say, "My spirit, my faith has never been stronger than it is today. It never would've gotten this strong if we'd stayed in the church."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I'll say, "Well, why is that?" And their answer is, "Because we didn't know where we were going."

Sara: Wow.

Deb: We stepped out in faith and didn't even know if there'd be a step there to land on, and there were many times when, I think it was probably pretty even, sometimes I would be pulling or pushing or suggesting to the session, "Hey, let's do this." And they'd look at me and say, "Great idea. How about six months from now? 'Cause we're not ready for that yet."

Sara: (laughs)

Deb: So, we had that kind of relationship, but then the other times, they would say, "Well, I think we need to do this and let's launch this act of faith and let's..." Uh, no, let's not make it cumbersome to start a new ministry, and I'd be going, "But, but, but."

After we sold the building, we knew we had enough money from the sale of the building to last for seven years, which ended in 2021, and along the way they said to me...

By that time I had become full-time, called and installed, so about a month later, another church contacts us and wants to join us. They are going to have to sell their building but they have these vibrant missional ministries, New Life Presbyterian Church.

We ended up providing pastoral staff and music staff to them for three years while they transitioned and ultimately dissolved their congregation, but their members joined South and brought with them six of their acts of faith.

Sara: Mm.

Deb: Six ministries. So, that was exciting.

But, back to the session, here I am newly installed and they look at me in a meeting and say, "We need to hire a full-time associate pastor." And I said, "Why? We've got like, 40 members."

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: "Why would we do that? And you know how much money that's gonna take away from the sustainability if we're living off the sale of the building?"

They said, "W- we know, but we need to do that because we need that person to be the AOF coordinator." And I said, "And what am I supposed to do?" And they said, "Well, we want you to be discerning, mapping out where God is leading us so that we can be f- financially sustainable for the future."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I'm like, "Oh my God, I don't know about... This is crazy." And I said, "You know you're gonna burn through the money that much faster." And one... the clerk of session at the time looked at me and she said, in front of the whole group, "You know, we may go out in a blaze of glory, but it's gonna be God's glory-

Sara: Hm.

Deb: ... and we are not gonna be scared about this."

Sara: Mm.

Deb: So there are plenty of times when the session took hold of this process and dragged me along as much as I was kind of leading them along at other times, so it, it has been a real community of faith effort.

Sara: It sounds like a group of people who have confronted their own mortality.

Deb: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Sara: Do you notice in the folks who have been through that experience, in the beginning, um, hear your testimony that this has made things alive for them, that we're not the same level of vitality beforehand.

Deb: Yes.

Sara: How would you describe some of the shifts that you saw leaders go through during this huge shift in the church's life?

Deb: Well, one of my shifts that I went through was that for about the first three years that I was there, I kept praying, "Please God, can I leave now?"

I wanted to be faithful to my call. I felt woefully inadequate, even though I had 20 years o- doing this kind of stuff in the community. It was different with church because it's my faith.

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I just take very seriously my commitment to be the shepherd or the touchstone or accompany-er on the journey with these folks, and I'm thinking to myself, "I don't know that I can do this." There- there's nothing that prepares you in seminary for what we're all having to do now.

At least, there wasn't-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... when I went 30 years ago.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And yet I came out of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, which was Martin Luther King's alma mater and the whole social gospel of Rauschenbusch and those people, and so I felt like I did have a strong foundation, but I don't know about you but I get this jittery vibrational feeling when I'm standing on holy ground.

Sara: Mm. Yeah.

Deb: And that was a part of me almost every day, and I'm going, "Who am I that thou are mindful of me?" (laughs) You know-

Sara: Mm.

Deb: ... "What the hell is going on here?"

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: This is not like anything anybody's ever seen, that I've been able to research.

So, I was dealing with my own stuff but always for these three years. (laughs) I kept getting, "Not yet. It's not time yet."

Sara: Mm.

Deb: And here I am 15 years later, still there, finally now contemplating retirement. I will turn 70 in January and so maybe a year after that I may be retiring, and the church knows. I mean, we're having open discussions about it. But, what I would see in the other people echoed that.

I think we were all on very similar journeys, which is why I shared my thing.

We had two members in particular, long time members, one serving on session, one serving on the deacons, who would just burst into tears and say, "I can't do this. I can't not be here. Too much of my life has gone on here."

Sara: In this building.

Deb: Yes. We're talking 30 or 40 years they've been going to church there.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: So we had a lot of sessions of processing our own feelings.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: New beginnings had happened around the same time, a little before this, so we had that to build upon, which was also helpful, and we pray about everything. We did then. We do now.

Before any big vote, we'll do a 40 days of prayer-

Sara: Wow.

Deb: ... period leading up to that, and I know that was new for all of us. I don't think I had ever...

Maybe I'd done that once before in my life but it just has become a regular...

It's not frequent. Thank goodness we don't have that many major decisions to make anymore, but I will send out a daily reading-

Sara: Mm.

Deb: ... during those 40 days and say, it's a one sentence thing, "Pray about this during the day." And in the process, it takes us from beginning to being open, I think, is a goo-

I, I was a musician for a lot of years. It's kinda like the crescendo, you know, and you're starting small and then it just gets larger and larger and, and the space opens up during the 40 days, and I think that really had a deep meaning for a lot of people in the congregation, but those two people I mentioned, when it came around time to vote on this after the three or four years we were discussing the sale of the building... And get this, they wanted to have, so we did, the congregational meeting to vote on this, on Easter Sunday.

Sara: Mm.

Deb: And I said, "Are you crazy? I mean, Easter." You know, go out to dinner with your family or something.

They were like, "No."

Sara: (laughs)

Deb: "This is the resurrection of our church." And I'm like, "Have at it."

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: And so there were 33, I think, voting members. One was a w- who just had said to me, "I will never vote to sell my church."

Sara: Mm.

Deb: But the others, 32 or whatever, it was unanimous among them, and of those two women, one of them made it a point to sign her ballot.

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I said, "Why'd you sign this?" And she said, "Because I want everyone to know that it may be hard for me but I support what we're doing. This is where God is calling us."

Sara: Wow.

Deb: I have observed the same sort of hesitancy, trepidation, overwhelmed feelings that I had, happening in them.

One of the women in the church asked me once, "How far ahead are you thinking?" And I said, "What do you mean?"

She said, "Well, you know, you're planning all of this. How far out do you plan?"

Sara: (laughs)

Deb: And I said, "Well, short-term it's three months, and w- when I'm really looking at a long arc, it's a couple years, and so I'm preaching now what I think might take root six or eight months from now." And she said, "That's what I thought." And I said, "Why do you ask?" And she said, "Because it helps me to know that I can trust that we're still gonna be here in six or eight months."

Sara: Mm.

Deb: And I said, "Well it's God's plan. We're just trying to pay attention and do what God wants us to do."